



Yolanda Washington
Oral History Transcription

Saint Mary's College COVID-19 Oral History Project

Interviewed by:	Emma Haigh
Place of interview:	Zoom
Date of interview:	February 10, 2023
Approximate length of interview:	32 minutes
Transcribed by:	Emma Haigh, Student, Saint Mary's College, with review and time stamping by Lillian Magers-Pershing, Student Professional, IU South Bend Civil Rights Heritage Center
Date of transcription:	March 2023
Summary:	Yolanda Washington, a nurse in South Bend Indiana, speaks about her experience during the Covid 19 pandemic.

0:00:00 [Emma Haigh]: Alright this is Emma Haigh, and it is Friday, February 10th at 9:30. And what is your name?

[Yolanda Washington]: My name is Yolanda Washington.

[EH]: Awesome. And where do you live?

[YW]: I live in South Bend, Indiana.

[EH]: So, Yolanda, what was your life like before the pandemic began?

0:00:24 [YW]: Oh, wow. Pre-pandemic, outgoing, community person, very involved, helping people everywhere meet them on the streets, in the stores, visiting family members, and going to different churches, and just very outgoing and very involved with the community and with the people around me. And my family members of course.

[EH]: So, when you first learned about Covid? What were your personal thoughts and experiences?

0:01:02 [YW]: Well, when I first learned about Covid, it didn't really dawn on me because I think that was like in, I want to say like January, where it was the first time I heard of a Covid case. And it really didn't dawn on me at that time what Covid really was. Although, they would talk about it, but not as much, in January and February of 2020.

0:01:27 And so, it wasn't until March of 2020 when the world came to a pause, when they shut everything down, that it really hit me, that, "wow, this thing is really serious." So, it wasn't until that moment that I really took a step back and said, "wow this is something that's going to be life changing."

[EH]: Absolutely. So, how did your life change in the beginning of the pandemic with your job, with your family, communities, your health, spiritually... kind of whatever you wanna get into.

0:02:03 [YW]: So, in the beginning, of course when the world itself shut down everything was shut down. We had to work in place, I actually had to work from home for the first – I'm gonna say about the first 60 days, I worked from home. But because I am a nurse, I am considered an essential employee so at that moment I did return to the office.

It was the bare minimum. It was probably about maybe five or six of us and we all had our own working space at that time. And of course, we

had to return to work with our mask on. We had to make sure we were social distancing. And at that time, they had put up plexiglass in our areas so that our areas really – we, we only were contained in our areas.

0:02:45 As far as my home life, I pretty much stayed home at that time. I didn't go anywhere. The children didn't go out. They were homeschooled at that time, everything was online. If I did go out, it was maybe to pick up a few groceries and that bas – basically was about it. But other than that, I didn't go anywhere. I didn't go see any family members, but I also continued to go to church at that time.

0:03:10 Even though our church was shut down for everyone else. Again, I was considered one of those essential congregant members. And so, I continued to go to church. And of course, assist my pastor and whatever was needed because I am a missionary so, an evangelist. So, what I do is I continue to work, and continue to serve. And I did continue to serve in that capacity during that shutdown. So that was the only place I went, was to my church and to serve on Sundays and back home.

[EH]: That's beautiful. What kind of – what kind of nurse are you?

0:03:47 [YW]: Well, funny you would ask. Pretty much pediatrics honestly. I pretty much tend to pediatrics and of course prenatal – prenatal nursing, pregnant moms, educating, training, those kinds of things.

[EH]: So, what were your – or what were the biggest challenges for you throughout 2020?

0:04:06 [YW]: Oh my gosh. The biggest challenge for me was listening to the news. Which I limited it, just so you know, I did not spend a lot of time in front of that TV. Listening to everything they had to say. Of course, I did have to turn it on from time to time just so I could get an update on what was going on in the world.

But hearing, that so many lives were lost due to Covid. And, I must say this, I don't know that all the millions of peoples of lives that they reported were actually lost due to Covid or due to the complications associated with Covid. So, but I do know a lot of lives was lost because of Covid. So, but hearing that really, really put a burden on my heart. It

really hurt. It really made me feel down, feel sad for the people and for the world itself.

0:04:52 Because so many people was losing their lives and I just felt that – and, of course, I didn't know because I was sheltered and at home, I didn't know what was being done to treat these people. If there was a – if there was treatment at that time. Or was these people just showing up to the hospital because there was nothing anybody knew about because it was just so new that they just passed away because we couldn't offer them the help that they needed at that time. So, it was really sad. It was a really, really sad time.

0:05:22 [EH]: Absolutely. So how did the early pandemic affect the way that you communicated with others – people close to you or, like, your colleagues, your family members and your friends?

[YW]: So as far as my family members, again, I didn't go visit anymore. That was pretty much put on hold just like everyone else. It was basically phone calls, FaceTime, Zoom meetings.

0:05:51 Even with my colleagues, it was pretty much Zoom meetings again, when – when the world was sheltered in place, I really took heed to that. And I really stayed at home, me and my family, we didn't go anywhere. It was just basically just phone calls to check on everybody, see how you're doing, and of course to pray with people, as they needed it. And most of the people that called me or that I reached out to them really needed the prayers at that time. So a lot of time was really spent praying for people with, either with them or in my alone time with God.

0:06:24 [EH]: So, in 2020 – you talked about this a little bit already, how your family sheltered in place – but what were your responses to policies and practices on quarantining, masking, distancing in public spaces, workspaces, community spaces, things like that?

[YW]: I really abided by them. And I encouraged the people around me to abide by them – by them as well. And during the – the early part of the pandemic, I actually spent time creating policies and procedures on the workplace and in church for people to follow, based off the recommendations and the guidelines of the CDC and our state health department.

0:07:09 So, a lot of my time was spent creating those policies. So that when we were able to return to work in full force, that those policies and procedures would be implemented. Whether it was at the job or at my church. And, even in my home – and which to this day really honestly, I haven't really had a lot of people over to my house because of the pandemic.

But even during that time, like my husband, he was considered an essential worker as well, so he had to go to work every day. But anytime anyone walked into my house, they had to wash their hands, they had to wear their mask. Cleaning my house was – oh my goodness – probably two or three times a day washing down walls and those high touch surface areas. And so, I really, really took heed to the recommendations that came from others in the CDC or the federal government.

0:07:56 [EH]: So, you said that even to this day you don't have a ton of people over. Do you notice a lot of other things that you do in your own private home that changed because of the pandemic? Like, to this day?

[YW]: Yeah. Yeah, actually that is true, me and my husband, we used to host a lot of the family gatherings – a lot of them gatherings. And because of the pandemic we – well, first of all, came to a halt. And since then, we have really scaled back because, even though it is on the downswing and I'm so grateful to God for that, I still want to be cautious, and I still want to protect my family.

0:08:35 I can honestly say that during the pandemic, and I'm so grateful to God to even be able to say this, that I never once tested positive for Covid at all the entire time. And I'm so grateful, never even had any symptoms of it during that time of Covid. So again, I'm so grateful and I owe that all to God. I know it wasn't anything that I did. Because even though I did abide by the guidelines, I wore my mask, and to this day I still wear my mask. I still wash my hands.

And I know there was others that did follow the guidelines and they still ended up with Covid. So again, I am grateful that I didn't have that experience and I can't speak on it per se, but I've followed those guidelines and I continue to follow them. And I also did the vitamins – and zinc and vitamin C and so I'm grateful there's no other words. I don't have any other words other to say than I'm just so grateful.

0:09:30 [EH]: That's awesome. So – this is kind of on the same thread again – but how does the pandemic affected the communities that you belong to? So, you talked about your church or any other communities that you belong to?

[YW]: So, I also uh, work with the Indiana Minority Health Coalition. And so again I, as I said, I did a lot with pregnant women. And so, when we did start reopening up – when the world did start opening up and we could go back out in the world, and we started having social gatherings, whether it was at church or in the workplace, again I would implement those guidelines. We followed those guidelines and the recommendations from the CDC social distancing and masks.

0:10:18 I did a lot of educating with the people in my community and especially with the people of color. I really took heed to it. I took pride in teaching and understand – and spreading the word and getting the word out to others because I wanted people to be safe. And especially being a woman of color and – speaking to the people of color – I know oftentimes we don't always listen to the policies and procedures and the recommendations that come forth. But it makes a difference when a woman of color can talk to an audience of color. It comes across, it seems, "well, she's doing it. There must be some truth to it." Especially coming from a professional background of being a registered nurse.

0:11:02 So, I really took heed in that, and I took pride in that. And I – and I did those instructions everywhere I went. I spent time with people from, oh my goodness – from three years old, all the way up to the eldest person – teaching them on the importance of washing their hands and wearing their mask and social distancing and staying away from staying home if they were sick. And uh, even when the vaccine came out – getting your vaccinations and eating healthy and proper exercise. I really, really engaged our community into that.

0:11:36 [EH]: That's awesome. I bet you saved so many lives and helped so many people. That's really powerful. Thank you so much for that.

[YW]: I just did my part and hopefully it did make a difference, so –

[EH]: So, what changes have you noticed the most of these communities like, that stay to this day, if that makes sense?

0:12:00 [YW]: Yeah, well, I can honestly say once the mask mandate was lifted uh, I think people were more relieved. I personally see and – and, to this day, I see more people having more gatherings, more in person, versus Zooms and phone conferences. I actually see more people getting together which is really awesome. Because during that time, it was a time of isolation and – and also some reflection. And I hate to divert and go back but let us just regress for a second.

0:12:35 Even during that time, I spent that time getting to know myself again. Getting to know my family members again, my immediate family who lived in my household, getting to know my children again. What they like, what they didn't like, their favorite color, their favorite foods. I spent that time cooking dinner every day of the week, breakfast, lunch and dinner every day of the week because I had the time to do it.

Spending that alone time with God, which was so important. Which I didn't stop then anyway but sometimes, instead of it being the first thing I do in the morning, it was kinda like the last thing I would do at night. So being able to put that back firsthand was just so awesome. And still, even implement that into my life today.

0:13:20 So, but as far as those changes now, I see that the world is back open, it's back in full force. People are happier to be back together again and that is so awesome. But I still remind people that you still want to take those precautions, you know. If you're not feeling well, you should stay home. If you're not feeling well, you should probably put on a mask. Just because you don't know if it's the common cold or if it's actually Covid.

And I still reinforce the healthy eating and taking care of your body and taking vitamins if it's your choice to. I encourage people to take care of themselves. Because we're responsible for ourselves and if we don't take care of ourselves, who will? So, I still spend a time, I still spend time doing that.

0:14:05 [EH]: That's awesome. So, you said that you didn't get sick with Covid, but –

[YW]: Yes.

[EH]: Has anybody you know gotten sick during the outbreak?

[YW]: Yes, actually right in the midst of 2020 – no actually, it was all in '21, actually. My father ended up having Covid and I'm so grateful to God that he's still alive today. And no residuals from that. I'm so grateful but there was some distant cousins that ended up testing positive. And one of my distanced cousins did pass away because of Covid.

0:14:48 But yeah, there was people that was near and dear to my heart that did test positive but, again, I'm so grateful that they all survived it. Because as we know, millions did not and so again, so grateful to God. He's the only one no matter what. And my dad actually spent probably about four weeks at the hospital with Covid. So, once he got Covid because he was probably 80 – 80 – 82 at that time – about 80 years old at that time when he did contract Covid. He spent about four weeks in the hospital. Two weeks on the medical floor. And then another two weeks back in rehab, getting his strength back up and learning how to do everything all over again. So, but grateful to God that he is home today.

0:15:42 [EH]: That's awesome. I'm so glad he's okay.

[YW]: Yes.

[EH]: So, in what ways do you think Covid is affecting people's mental and physical health?

[YW]: Yeah, yeah. Mentally, I know that people are still dealing with it. I've also had coworkers who tested positive for Covid. And you know there's a thing that they call 'long haul'. And I truly believe that – that the mental issues that people are dealing with is part of that long haul.

0:16:20 Having to deal with the fact that, for one, they had Covid, and they survived. Two, having to deal with the fact that they had Covid, and they still have some residuals symptoms, such as the cough, or the inability to sleep. Or as one coworker mentioned to me – even though she had Covid about a year ago – to this day, her taste is still off, and her smell is still off.

So, I know it still exists and it still affects her mentally because she doesn't get as much sleep as she did prior to Covid. I don't know if it was the sense of fear – that if she laid down and go to sleep that she wouldn't wake up. Or just the fact – dealing with the fact that she even had Covid.

0:17:09 So, I know the mental issues still exist. I know that people are still depressed. I know that people are still having enzyme – excuse me, insomnia and anxiety beyond the fact that they actually had Covid.

[EH]: So, news coverage during the pandemic, focused on inequities in various – in a variety of ways, including unequal risk of contracting Covid, and inequitable vaccine distribution. Have you encountered any of these narratives in your life or in people you know? And, if so, what are your thoughts about them?

0:17:50 [YW]: I do know that it has happened in some of the people's lives that I have encountered, especially dealing with the African American or with the Black population. I'm – I know for sure that – and this is what people told me – because I am a nurse and people – and people in my family know that I am a nurse. And they'll call and say, "hey. You know what, I got Covid. I just found that I have Covid, but they sent me home and just told me to take some vitamins over the counter. And what else do you recommend?"

0:18:19 And of course, I would give them the recommendations of the – that the CDC recommended. And, of course again, with our local health department. And on the flipside, I was people's coworkers who was – excuse me – was of a different color, especially dealing with the Caucasians people, they would say that they tested positive for Covid, and they got started on medications to treat the Covid.

So, I know there was a difference in the equity and what they did for Blacks as compared to whites because of what was being said to me. So, I did make mental notes so that during that time – when Covid was – when we were dealing with so many different cases for Covid. Some people went into hospitals and – excuse me – received what was called the 'Covid cocktails.'

0:19:06 But again, all of them were white people. None of the Black people – none of the Black population ever shared with me that they went to the hospital and got treated with a 'Covid cocktail.' They were sent home.

Except in the fact that they were having trouble breathing, so much trouble breathing that they required oxygen. So, they would stay in the hospital and receive oxygen at that time. But, as far as medication – there was one gentleman, he was Black, he did get treated. He was so

deathly ill, at the time, and he said that they did treat him with Covid medication to bring him back around. So, there was a disparity as far as who received the treatment and who didn't receive the treatment so –

[EH]: So, did you...

[YW]: Which is sad.

0:19:59 [EH]: That's heartbreaking.

[YW]: Yes.

[EH]: And there's so many problems with that.

[YW]: Yes.

[EH]: Do you think that –

[YW]: That's why – one of the reasons that I spent so much time educating the Black community. "Okay this is what you need to know. This is what you should do. This is who you should call. These are the guidelines you should follow." So, I – and again I take pride in that because we have to look out for each other.

0:20:26 And unfortunately – I look out for everybody because I don't care if you're Black, white, Hispanic, that doesn't bother me at all. But when I know that my community is on the downswing of being treated unfairly, whatever I can do to help them, I'm gonna do then. And basically, a lot of this is education and spending time with them.

[EH]: That's so –

[YW]: I love my community. [laughter]

[EH]: That's awesome.

[YW]: [laughter]

[EH]: I really – I really think you helped so many lives during Covid. That's unbelievable. That's really insane.

[YW]: I give God glory. And again, I – I just hoped and prayed that I was able to help somebody along the way. [laughter]

- 0:21:06 [EH]: So, did you experience any of these in your – any of these like, disparities in your unit specifically? I know you work with pediatrics so probably like – it's probably different but do you have any personal experience with it?
- [YW]: Only in the adult population is what I seen it the most – in the adult population. And again, it's only because of what they said to me. Like, they would reach out and tell me, you know, like this is what my doctor said, or this is what my doctor did or didn't do. So that's how I know that it – it still existed and still existed during that time.
- 0:21:40 [EH]: And in South Bend?
- [YW]: And in South Bend. Yes ma'am. And in South Bend.
- [EH]: So, going off of more in South Bend specifically, how have the municipal leaders and government officials in your community – or in South Bend – how did they respond to the outbreak?
- 0:22:04 [YW]: I think that initially, I think they did a great job by getting everyone off the streets and into their homes, sheltering everybody in place and just – keeping it just essential workers are out. I think that was awesome. I don't think that they spent enough time in the – in the Black community educating them and making sure they had the right resources and the same resources that they did for other races.
- 0:22:37 And I could understand this is difficult and this – and this is probably even scary to a certain extent. But when you look at the overall state of the city, you wanna make sure that you hit those areas where the disparities are high. You wanna make sure you focus on those areas – focus on those areas and send resources to those areas that need it. And then work your way backwards. So, I think they could of spent more time in the Black communities doing more for them.
- [EH]: How do you think being in South Bend, or in Indiana, in general, shaped your experience versus maybe people you know who are living in other areas?
- 0:23:26 [YW]: Well, I think I like the fact that being here in South Bend, Indiana that it's smaller. So being able to reach more people really should be our focus and it really shouldn't be as – a problem as – as people that – who live in the bigger states. So, I look at that as an advantage for the

state of Indiana. South Bend – South Bend is just such a small city compared to some.

I really can't speak a lot on the big cities, although the fact that of course, we know that because they were big – because there are bigger states, they had more people die because of Covid. And more people that tested positive because of Covid because they are such bigger states. So, that's really about as much as I can talk about the bigger states. Although again, as I said, I did not travel during that time. I stayed put right in South Bend, Indiana. [laughter] I did not go out of my city [laughter] at all.

0:24:29 [EH]: Well, that goes right into my next question. [laughter]

[YW]: Oh wow. [laughter]

[EH]: This is probably gonna be a no, but if you left South Bend – during or throughout the pandemic – how did that experience compare?

[YW]: [laughter] I did not. [laughter] When they said stay in your house, I stayed in my house. When they said you can go out and go to the store, I went out went to the store, went back home again, wearing my mask, social distancing, wearing gloves, and making sure people were distanced in front of me six feet and behind me six feet. And then I went back home and, like I said, again, to church. But other than that, I did not leave out of the state of Indiana to go anywhere.

0:25:07 As a matter of fact, the first time I traveled out of the state of Indiana, since 2020, was in – I wanna say in April of 2022. That was the first time that I actually traveled out of the state of Indiana. I did not go out of my state. And then, it traveled to a funeral, and I wore my mask, and I social distanced. [laughter] So, and they didn't die because of Covid, they had other health issues, but again I did not – I followed those guidelines. I really did.

[EH]: That's awesome. So, how is your relationship with your family, friends, community, changed at this stage of the pandemic? Like what we're in now.

0:25:58 [YW]: Now I actually went back out. I'm more involved in the community, doing social – doing social engagements, doing more social gatherings. Although I must admit, I do like the convenience of

Zooms. Because I can be doing anything and then just stop and attend to a meeting and then go back to doing to what I'm doing. Instead of traveling across town to go to attend a meeting, find a parking spot, go in the building, especially in the wintertime, it's cold, it's storming, and – although we've been blessed it hasn't been as bad.

And then coming back to my – to my place of work. So, I do like the convenience of the Zoom meetings, but I am back out in the community. I am doing more – am doing more social gatherings. I am seeing more family members. Again, I still wore my mask because I wanna be careful.

0:26:50 Like my father, I told you he was in his 80s – he's in his 80s and he does not want to be vaccinated. And so, I make sure that my brothers and sisters, whenever we go around my father, I make sure we wear our mask at all times and make sure we're using good hand washing. And I tell 'em if you're not feeling well don't – don't – don't visit him. You know, at that time because he's – he's in his 80s and he's – he's older now. And he does have other health issues, so I make sure we're very careful. Not just around him, but if I'm going around any elderly person, I wear my mask because I want to protect them as well.

0:27:26 So, but as far as being out, being more social, that I am. And I'm also – my children are out more, they're in sports. And so, I still wear my mask to basketball games. [laughter] I'll pull them down if I'm just like right by my husband and maybe my other son or something. But if I'm in the midst of a crowd of people, ope, I'm pulling that mask up. [laughter] And I'm being careful, so.

[EH]: That's awesome.

[YW]: But it is nice to be back out in the community again and it's nice to actually see people's faces and to see people smile. So, I do enjoy that.

[EH]: That's awesome. So how has the pandemic changed the way you see yourself and you see others?

0:28:16 [YW]: Because of the pandemic, I think I've always been appreciative of life period. But I think because of the pandemic, I'm more appreciative of life and the little things in life. Such as, just getting up in the morning, fixing breakfast, spending time with family, being able to go to church.

And – and socialize with the people, and fellowship with the people at church.

It was difficult, during the pandemic, without seeing everybody and not knowing the well-being of everyone. And again, it was just limited – the number of individuals that could attend church at that time, probably about ten people, I think, was the most. And we have a congregation of like 200, 250 people. So, seeing them back in church, seeing their faces, seeing them get around, seeing them smile again – oh my gosh. I just love it.

0:29:16

And it just makes you really appreciate life and people. It makes you appreciate your family. It also makes you appreciate your health and strength. Because, like so many who passed away, and so many who are still dealing with the side effects of Covid. It's just, I don't – I don't there – there are no words. I don't have any words other than I'm just so grateful that we survived it.

And we're here to talk about it and be able to tell our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren of what we experienced; you know? But it's good to be past it. And again, it's just appreciation for life, it's appreciation for work. I appreciate going to work, I appreciate helping people, I appreciate educating people. So, it's just an appreciation, a different appreciation like never before.

[EH]: That's awesome. So, again, you keep answering the next question you're right on topic!

0:30:20

[YW]: Oh, my goodness! No way! [laughter]

[EH]: I was gonna say how do you view the pandemic now?

[YW]: It was definitely a learning experience. It definitely was a trying time. It definitely was a time of sadness. But even during the pandemic, I never took my focus off of God and never took my focus off of what He could do.

If anything, again, it just drew me closer to Him, knowing that no matter what was going on, He was still in control. He still has and nothing could happen to anybody without Him allowing it to happen no matter what. And so, it was just like – it's a time that I will never forget.

[laughter] Never will I forget the pandemic. And again, it just brought a

whole new appreciation of life, health, and strength of what it means and to be able to help people. So –

0:31:32 [EH]: Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to share?

[YW]: I don't want us as a population, as a generation, as a group of people, no matter what race – I don't want us to forget what we came through together. Because you did see more people helping out people. I mean – during the time of the pandemic, where the elderly people couldn't get out, I found myself going to the grocery store and putting groceries on their step. Or if I found out they were sick, I would go to the store and get them vitamins and juice and that type of stuff and just put it outside for them.

And I think the world as a whole did that. We came together during a time such as that to meet the needs of the people. And I don't want us to go back to our selfish ways pre-pandemic. I want us to remem – to continue to treat our brothers and sisters like they are our brothers and sisters, regardless of their race and that's what I want us to continue to do. To love one another regardless.

0:32:38 [EH]: That's awesome.